

Juvenal

‘A ZEALOUS VINDICATOR OF ROMAN LIBERTY’?

Niall Rudd

Dryden's lengthy essay on the nature of satire, published in 1693 as a preface to his translation of Juvenal, includes a stirring account of Juvenal as the castigator of the vices of his age – 'a zealous vindicator of Roman liberty'. Dryden believed wrongly that Juvenal wrote under Domitian and advocated a return to the freedom of the Republic, but taken in a general sense the title will still serve as a point of departure. What risks did Juvenal face, and how did he cope with them?

Domitian and Trajan

In A.D. 81, when Domitian became emperor, Juvenal was probably in his late teens or early twenties. As he was neither a senator, nor a famous preacher, nor a member of the palace staff, he had little to fear from the new regime. Declamations were safe enough. Verbal attacks were another matter. Domitian 'forbade the publication of lampoons directed at prominent men and women' (Suetonius, *Domitian* 8.3). This would have deterred a budding satirist; but there was also the far greater danger of offending the emperor himself. In Domitian's last years even the mildest kind of satirical comment was out of the question, as may be seen from the chilling accounts of Suetonius and the Greek historian Cassius Dio. Eventually, in A.D. 96, the assassin struck, and the cloud of dread began to lift. Domitian's successor, old Nerva, did what he could to restore confidence; but it soon became clear that he lacked the necessary power to hold the empire together. Fortunately there was a way out, and (whether voluntarily or under pressure) Nerva took it. He adopted Trajan and had him proclaimed emperor.

On returning to Rome in A.D. 99 Trajan did a good deal to encourage the revival of free speech, and thereby won the praises of contemporaries including Tacitus and Pliny. Such liberty still fell short of anything which we would regard as adequate, but it did represent a significant easing of tension, and it meant that Domitian's reign was no longer immune to criticism. Actually such retrospective attacks were not new. Nero had allowed Seneca's 'Pumpkinification of the Blessed Claudius'; and Domitian had tolerated adverse comment on Nero. For some reason Juvenal had never availed himself of the same licence. One also wonders why, after Domitian's death, Juvenal should have waited for something like sixteen years before publishing his first book (i.e. *Satires 1-5*).

That book may well have appeared before Trajan left for Parthia in 113. If he read it, he may have been rather surprised at the allegation that powerful informers were still at work (1.33-36); he will also have noted Juvenal's protest at the lenient sentence on Marius Priscus charged with extortion (1.49-50). (Trajan had presided at the trial.) But in the main there was little to cause him offence. With a couple of possible exceptions, Juvenal's victims were either unimportant or dead; that was in keeping with the plan announced at the end of *Satire* 1. In view of such caution we should perhaps not be over-impressed by those initial expressions of euphoria on the part of Tacitus and Pliny. After all, Trajan accepted Domitian's decisions as valid precedents and took over no less than thirty-five of his *amici*.

Graeculi and toadies

Leaving individuals aside, and considering the largest group attacked by Juvenal, we might wonder whether any high-placed Greeks resented the ridicule contained in *Satires* 3 and 6. A dozen or more Greeks had been appointed by Nero to imperial procuratorships; Trajan had doubled the number of senators from the Greek east; and according to an ancient biographer, Hadrian 'was so devoted to Greek pursuits that in some quarters he was called a *Graeculus*'. Greek influence made itself felt at every level – in the professions, in business, and in entertainment.

Greek lecturers and men of letters were frequently employed as diplomats. The most famous examples of Greeks prominent at Rome are Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom, and Lucian; but there were others too, like Favorinus, the hellenized Gallic eunuch, and Polemo from Laodicea in Phrygia, who helped Hadrian to draw up his final statement on the affairs of the whole empire. Not all these men would have read Juvenal. Of those who did, some could afford to dismiss him as an insignificant malcontent; others, having achieved success within the Roman system, regarded their fellow-Greeks with some detachment, as the satirist Lucian did in his *Nigrinus* and *Dependent Scholars*; others may well have been offended by the satirist's blatant prejudice, but what could they do? Many kinds of Greek name were to be found in his pages: names of dead individuals, names of dead people which now represented types, 'group' names (like Protogenes in the sense of 'a Protogenes'), 'significant' names (like Trypherus, Mr. Dainty), names from literature and mythology. But the only contemporaries mentioned were people of no social importance, like actors, whores, and academics.

The reign of Domitian, as already remarked, was no longer sacrosanct. In *Satire* 1 we come across Domitian's favourite, Crispinus (27), the showy barrister Matho (32), the unnamed informer (Regulus?) with his sinister colleagues Massa and Carus (35-36); in *Satire* 2 there is a gross attack on Domitian himself (29-33); and the main part of *Satire* 4 is devoted to an emergency meeting of Domitian's cabinet to decide how to deal with the present of an enormous turbot. Some scholars take the view that, because of what he had experienced,

Juvenal's vision of Rome had become frozen at that period. This idea is readily combined with the belief that the satirist had been exiled. Yet there is no good reason to think that Juvenal suffered any harm under Domitian, and the emphasis on his reign is hardly disproportionate. Many illustrations of wickedness are drawn from the age of Nero (to go no further back); and in 8. 211-223 there is a powerful attack on Nero himself.

Literary echoes?

That passage, too, may have been influenced by stories heard in the poet's boyhood. But a further question has to be faced: would such memories have had any meaning for young, or even middle-aged, readers in, say, 120? It has been aptly pointed out that Martial's twelfth book of epigrams, published in 101 or later, contained reminiscences of the 80's and 90's; that Pliny's *Letters*, which appeared in instalments between 105 and 109, revived memories of the recent past (e.g. in 2.11 and 4.11); that Tacitus' *Histories*, which are probably referred to in *Satire* 2.102-103, were published in 110 (they dealt with events between A.D. 69 and 96); and finally that the *Annals*, which covered the period A.D. 14-68, were completed in 120 or shortly after and could therefore have influenced *Satire* 8 and *Satire* 10 (especially in the account of Sejanus' fall). All these works created a kind of secondary topicality for the people and events described; in doing so they also provided a rich store of *exempla* for the satirist.

Such borrowing, however, will hardly account for everything. While it is true that any reference to the period A.D. 69-96 could have been prompted by the *Histories*, no reference to the period A.D. 14-68 in *Satires* 1-6 could have been suggested by the *Annals*. Yet in *Satire* 1 there is mention of Lucusta, Corvinus, and Tigellinus from the age of Nero; *Satire* 3 speaks of Publius Egnatius Celer, who betrayed Barea Soranus in A.D. 66, and also of the dozing Claudius; in *Satire* 5 Claudius appears again, and we hear of Nero's long-nosed courtier, the ex-cobbler Vatinius; *Satire* 6 brings in Agrippina (Nero's mother), Caesonia (Caligula's wife), and Messalina (Claudius' wife). These are just a few of many instances. So, as well as drawing on other writers, Juvenal also *contributed* to the business of recalling the past.

Again, it has been suggested that after *Satire* 8 'Juvenal had exhausted his most fruitful vein of literary exploitation' and that in Books 4 and 5 'satire becomes a routine'. It is quite true that after *Satire* 8 we no longer get quite the same kind of satirical attack. Whether this change of technique should be explained just negatively, as due to exhaustion, is less certain. Juvenal was trying several new approaches, and it is a common experience that, when a successful mode is abandoned, readers and listeners are disappointed with what takes its place. It would be unfair to lump, say, 9, 10, and 15 together simply because none of them resembled 1-8. Even readers who are revolted by *Satire* 9, Juvenal's dialogue with a homosexual gigolo, can appreciate it as a *tour de force*: but clearly it was unrepeatable.

After a conversation with a single figure Juvenal widened his viewpoint so as to include the whole of the civilized world. *Satire* 10 is a declamation on the vanity of human, not just Roman, wishes; and therefore the *exempla* are drawn not only from Roman history, but also from Greek history and, beyond that, from the world of legend. In *Satire* 15 (on a case of cannibalism in Egypt) the scope narrows again. The satire concentrates on a specific instance of human depravity, but it is not a Roman instance. So perhaps the differences of satirical approach arise in part from the satires' different themes. In any case we can hardly talk of a routine.

Discretion and valour

It is, however, the first eight satires, with their aggressive personal technique, which pose the original question most starkly: if the days of fear had gone, why did Juvenal spare prominent contemporaries? Perhaps he was unwilling to give offence. But while that may be allowed as a factor in the case of the amiable Horace, who *could* have attacked anti-Caesian figures from a position of security, it is much less convincing with regard to the unplaced and censorious Juvenal. One must conclude that circumspection was still necessary. Thanks to a favourable tradition, Trajan enjoys unshakeable esteem as a good emperor. Fair enough; but one source mentions that he 'sometimes enjoyed the company of actors and was a pretty hard drinker'; according to Cassius Dio 'he was keen on boys and wine'; and the same report is found elsewhere. One hardly needs to transpose this idea into Juvenalian hyperbole to see how impossible it was. Right-hand men were also beyond criticism. No sane writer of the day would have ridiculed Augustus' Agrippa or Tiberius' Sejanus or Vespasian's Mucianus; and although Trajan's Licinius Sura had died a few years before the (assumed) date of Book 1, his shortcomings were not yet open to censure.

Juvenal's dilemma

Juvenal was therefore in a dilemma. To be 'willing to wound and yet afraid to strike' was an undignified condition and clearly incompatible with the function of a satirist. But there was no credit or satisfaction to be had from merely attacking the dead. We do not know how long he deliberated; and it is futile to speculate about drafts and revisions. In the end he hit on a way of escape: he would simply ignore the passage of time. With the aid of other writers, the last eighty years, or more, of Roman history would be treated as 'now'. Any example of crime, vice, or misfortune would be given a contemporary relevance; anything shocking would be made topical.

Inevitably there would be one or two anachronisms. Informing had ceased, castration had been forbidden, and condemned persons were no longer being burnt. Still, as conditions depended so much on the character of a single man, one never knew when such things might recur. Informing and castration had been banned before; astrologers, philosophers ,

and other undesirables had been banished and restored. And what of the long series of well-meaning measures about gluttony, adultery, jerry-building and much else besides which had never been revoked but merely ignored? If one took the period from Tiberius to Trajan as a whole, perhaps a dark picture was also the most authentic.

Such, then, was Juvenal's response to the restrictions of his time. We can now see that the vivid synchronic presentation of people and events was a distinctive feature of his art. But to readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who were less conscious of historical detail, it seemed that he was castigating his contemporaries; in the words of Dryden, 'he treats tyranny, and all the vices attending it, as they deserve, with the utmost rigour.' Perhaps Dryden was not so wrong after all.

This article is based on material from a book on Roman satire which will in due course be published by Duckworth.

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